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"THE SANCTUARY OF OUR FATHERS."

A

CENTENNIAL DISCOURSE,

PREACHED

SABBATH EVENING, OCTOBER 15, 1865.

IN THE

LECTURE ROOM

OF THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,

NANTUCKET.

BY REV. S. D. HOSMER, ACTING PASTOR OF THE CHURCH.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

NANTUCKET:

HUSSEY & ROBINSON, PRINTERS—INQUIRER AND MIRROR OFFICE.

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SERMON.

DEUT. 32: 7.—Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask thy father and he will show thee, thy elders, and they will tell thee.

On Tuesday, the 15th of October, 18⁷65, this building, having been removed from its former site, and re-built where our church now stands, a business meeting of its proprietors was held in their new meeting-house. As a centennial observance occurs but once in a lifetime, I have felt that we should heed the injunction of the text, and, leaving for an evening our customary audience-room in the adjoining church, within these ancient walls, on these plain seats, commune together of former days. A hundred years in the nation's annals runs back to colonial times. Our townsmen of Sherburne, as the place was then called, were loyal subjects of King George the Third. The last French and Indian War had closed two years before; and, by the folly of the mother country, the year 1765 became a memorable date, on account of the enactment of the Stamp Act, the entering wedge that led at last to the American Revolution. In our local chronicles, we find a population of over 3,000, and the islanders, in their pursuit of the whale-fishery, were daring navigators of the Atlantic, crossing the Arctic circle on Greenland's ice-bound shores. A dwindling remnant of the aborigines lived here, survivors of the epidemic that in 1763 swept off two-thirds of the

Indians. Recall the state of the New England churches a hundred years ago. There had been precious fruit gathered from the Great Awakening in 1740, and Whitfield's fervid eloquence had stirred the minds of the masses. But we read of no foreign mission work of the church; no organized effort for the religious welfare of seamen; no Bible or Tract Societies, no Sabbath Schools.

Through the labors of the Mayhews among the Indians of Nantucket, the first church was planted on this soil. In 1670, Rev. John Eliot visited the Vineyard, to assist in ordaining an Indian pastor. The teacher of the praying Indians of Nantucket being present, reported that about ninety families prayed to God. Soon after, we find a church of about thirty members, whereof twenty were men. In Mather's *Magnalia*, you may read an interesting letter, pertaining to the affairs of these converted Indians, from Mr. John Gardner, whose gravestone, still standing, remains the last link joining our times with that very early period. In 1698, two churches flourished, with three congregations beside, comprising five hundred christianized natives. Thus, before any religious societies existed among the whites, the pious zeal of one family had made the name of Jesus precious to many a savage.

It is well known that the views of the Friends gained a foothold early on this island, and have been extensively held, down to the present day. From the *Journal of Thomas Chalkley*, one of their preachers who visited Nantucket in 1698, we extract the following:—"After the first meeting was over, one asked the Minister, (so called) whether we might have a meeting at his house. He said with a good will, we might. This Minister had

some discourse with me, and asked what induced me to come hither, being such a young man? I told him I had no other view in coming, than the good of souls, and that I could say with the Apostle, that a necessity was laid upon me, and wo would be to me if I did not preach the Gospel. Then said he, I wish you would preach at my house in God's name. So next day we had a meeting at his house." At his next visit in 1704, Chalkley writes:—"divers of the people called Presbyterians were bitter in their spirits against us, yet some who went under that name, were more charitable, and received us with tenderness; and at some places we had meetings at their houses to our mutual satisfaction." Another journalist of the same year, says, "the island is inhabited by a mixed people, and some among them called Christian Indians; but no settled teachers of any kind."

The only historical proof I have seen, concerning the origin of this church, is contained in a work entitled "Congregational Churches of Massachusetts." It says, "In 1711, three churches were gathered; in October, the South Church in Andover; on the 1st of November the church in Truro, and not far from the same time the church in Nantucket, probably under the direction of the Mayhews. It is known that a small colony from Salisbury, chiefly Baptists, had been there more than fifty years, but no church of any kind was formed on the island, except such as Gov. Mayhew had gathered among the Indians, till a handful of emigrants from the Vineyard, were organized, as tradition says, about 1711." This house of worship is supposed to have been first erected at that period, as with some old papers years ago was found a bill of that date, for timber to build a meeting-

house. The account adds, that the timber was obtained from the huge and towering white oaks, with which the island was once covered. Like the heroes who lived and died unsung of bards, unknown as if they had never been born, the names of the founders and first pastors of this church, have perished. In June, 1732, Rev. Timothy White was officiating. He was a graduate of Harvard College in 1720, married here, and taught school as well as preached. It is not known how long he staid. He removed to Haverhill, where he died in his 64th year.

From Chalkley's diary, in 1737, we quote an extract, from which we infer that our Society had a minister at that date. "The Priests who have money for preaching, the Lawyers, who have it for pleading, and the Physicians, who have money for giving Receipts for health, are poor Trades here on this island."

At the proprietors' meeting, in June, 1761, it was "voted, that we invite Mr. Mayhew to tarry, and Preach to us so long as he likes to stay." This clergyman was Rev. Joseph Mayhew, probably the son of Rev. Experience Mayhew, of Martha's Vineyard; and, if our conjecture be true, a graduate of Cambridge, in 1730, and tutor from 1739 to 1755. During his tarry of five years, this house was taken down; removed from its site beyond the North burying ground, to the spot our church now occupies, on Beacon Hill, as it was then called. The records indicate that work began in February, and was completed in October, 1765. I find a list of the pews in the new meeting-house, as numbered and drawn for by the subscribers, counting up forty-seven pew owners, and the names of Coffin, Gardner, Myrick, recur frequently. There appears the name of one female, Ruth Coffin.

The church was re-organized at the settlement of the Rev. Bezaleel Shaw, (who graduated at Harvard College in 1762,) on November 25th, 1767. Our church manual speaks of him as a good man, and a mild preacher. A chapter in a book, entitled "Letters of an American Cultivator," a series of letters written between 1770 and 1781, speaks of there being but one clergyman here, who presides over the instruction of a very considerable, and very respectable congregation. The writer evidently spent much time on our island, as he devotes 120 pages to Nantucket, and thirteen to the province of Massachusetts Bay.

Mr. Shaw's ministry of thirty years, was terminated by his death, in 1796, and some who remember his burial day, tell of the long procession from the church to the grave. It may be interesting in this connection, to give some extracts from the record-book of the proprietors, especially as our church records prior to 1799, have been lost. The first entry, in a fair, legible hand, is dated June ye 29th, 1761. In 1766, we find it "Voted, That the Singers shall have the seat to set in that was built for that Intent in the front gallery. Voted, That we will Chuse Mr. Barrett to tune the Psalm for the Congregation." Was it Sternhold and Hopkins' metrical version of the Psalms of David they used? and oh for some one to tell the tunes they sang. Perhaps Old Hundred, or Northfield, or those ancient fugue harmonies, part rolling in on part, whose performance requires more volume of sound than our modern quartette choirs afford. But to read again those time-stained leaves: "Voted that Peleg Gardner is chose to take care of the boys in the gallery, and to keep them in good order, and to invite any strangers below that want a seat,

when the gallery is full." In 1787 a committee was raised "to wait on Dr. Bartlett, and see on what conditions he will let his organ come into this meeting-house," which may have been an instrument of discord among the practitioners of music, as at the next meeting I find this entry: "Voted, that the singers who have carried on the singing be dismissed according to their request, and receive the thanks of the Society." Three years later, when the Society of Friends were removing their house of worship, they were invited "to make use of this house for their publick meetings on each Sabbath Day, at any time from Eleven o'clock in the morning untill Four o'clock in the afternoon, and on all other days in the week, at any time, and at all times of the day, so long as they may need it." In May, 1792, eleven men were constituted a committee regulating the funerals of persons belonging to this Society. We find that a bell had been purchased, and a tower had been erected at the south end of the house, in the summer of 1795.

After Mr. Shaw's decease, Rev. David Leonard supplied the pulpit nearly a year. Rev. James Gurney was installed in 1799, for the term of five years; then was settled for life; yet was dismissed in 1819. The organization of the first Methodist church about the time of his installation, and the establishment of the present Unitarian Society in 1809, diminished alike the resources and numbers of this church. At one time it counted only three male members. God, however, remembered the little flock. The Spirit was poured out, conversions multiplied, and the church grew in graces and influence. Mr. Gurney taught school, and I have conversed with several persons who were his pupils. He is described as a fine singer as well as a vigorous preach-

er. Three of his discourses were published; a masonic address on St. John's day, the funeral sermon of Miss Lydia Perry, and also of Miss Sarah Whitney. He removed to Freetown, and died in 1839. Rev. Abner Morse succeeding him, preached three years. He died last May. Next follow, Rev. Stephen Bailey, Nathaniel Cobb, Stephen Mason, during whose pastorate the new church was built in 1834. The ministerial list continues: Rev. William J. Breed, George C. Partridge, J. S. C. Abbot, Charles Rich, George Thacher, Benjamin Judkins, Joseph E. Swallow, H. E. Dwight, Isaac C. White, ending with the present incumbent.

Let us suppose ourselves worshippers here seventy years ago. You enter through a porch with a front and two side doors opening outwards. As you step within the church through a double-leaved door, right opposite appears the high pulpit, behind whose closed doors and solid walls the preacher, as he sits, is hardly seen from below. For a canopy, see the heavy sounding-board hung from the roof just over the speaker. Beneath, on each side of the desk, sat the deacons, their hats hung on knobs on the pulpit front. A door under the south gallery opens into the tower, just built to receive the first bell that pealed forth its mellow call over these shores and waters. On three sides were galleries; that on the front the singers' place; in the north and south galleries sat strangers and the boys over whom tithing men did police duty with long black-tipped staves to rap the unruly into propriety; in the farthest corner was the negroes' pew, three of whom are recorded as church members. At the entrance door a broad aisle, with two short courts passing off midway its length to pews otherwise inaccessible, leads to the pulpit; and to right

and left diverge narrower alleys, which go round the house between its wall tier and central slips. The pews are those old-fashioned square compartments to accommodate a dozen or more, uncushioned, no crickets, nor elbow supports. People did not attend meeting to loll lazily, and a sleeper would have offended against the congregation as much as against the preacher. The proprietors were at no expense for lamps, though oil at Nantucket was easily obtained, as evening services were unknown; and as for fuel in winter, who ever heard of an old church with any fire, save the flame of devotion, to warm the worshippers. The men buttoned up their overcoats; while our grandmothers carried each a little foot-stove filled, the last thing before going to church, with hot embers from the great fire-place at home. The congregation devoutly stood through what was truly the long prayer, lifting up their seats which turned on hinges, and at the close of the prayer letting them down with a crash startling to delicate nerves, if there were any in those days. I presume the sermons of the good divine may generally have overrun the half hour of the modern preacher; certainly if, as elsewhere, tenths and even twelfths marked the divisions of the discourse. So worshipped the godly of a former generation.

What varied scenes during these hundred years have transpired under this roof?* The hopes and sorrows of individuals, families, and the community here have expressed themselves in fitting devotion. Our house of prayer has been found a Bethel to the burdened; a Bethlehem of praise and thank-offering to the joyful soul. Days of public calamity, and thanksgiving occa-

*We are told that this building served for a Court House at the trial of the Indian, Quibby. He was hung for the crime of murder, in 1769. This is the last execution that has taken place on the island.

sions have alike summoned hither the congregation. Some now living, remember funeral services in Washington's memory, when the pulpit draped in black, and the singing a selected dirge, formed part of the service. Will any hoary head in 1930, think you, tell of the mournful drapery, the crowded solemn assemblage in God's house, at the noon-day hour of President Lincoln's funeral on the sad 19th of April, 1865? From hence the dead have been borne to man's last house, the grave; here fervent prayer has been put up for friends far away on the restless sea; children have been dedicated in baptism; the Holy Sacrament has strengthened saints, who now look on the full glory of the Lamb. To one thoughtful of the past, yonder tablet,* with its antique figures, suggests much to be pondered. It becomes the fitting time-piece in this venerable edifice, on whose dial we read to-night more than the fleeting hours, the flight of a century. When this building ceased to be the church, I recognize a providence in the fact, that it did not, like old sanctuaries in other parts, pass to some secular use. These walls still echo to prayer and christian instructions, and see every Sabbath, what would have been a marvel in the olden time, the Sunday school. Our school commenced in December, 1819; may it attain to a centennial by God's favor. Precious revival seasons have consecrated this spot as the birth-place of souls. This and that man was born into Zion here. But two years ago, our Union prayer meetings drew in a goodly number to seek their own or others' conversion. You remember in the revival of 1842, the throngs that more than filled these seats. Our Young People's meet-

* A tablet, bearing the date 1765, in old style figures, as long as our oldest worshippers remember, has hung in front of the gallery.

ing, the result of the work of grace in 1858, has often crowded the upper room, and the Friday evening gathering of the church, make it to us like the Holy of Holies in the temple. May this house continue a religious shrine, as long as its frame-work of solid oak lasts. Heaven grant it escape from the devouring flame; let it be spared the demolition that usually removes the ancient dwellings of the forefathers; and may coming generations ascend the hill of Zion to this house of prayer and praise.

Our retrospect to-night may suggest a glance at the present wants of this church. Brethren and sisters; where are we weak in Christian efficiency? Let us find out Jerusalem's breaches, and in that place strengthen her ramparts. Numerically, we are a large church, by no means deficient in pecuniary ability; no heavy debt upon us,—'tis a pity the small debt were not wiped out;—we hold an influential station in society; we have a neat, commodious sanctuary, upon the pleasantest site for a church, in town. What lack we then? Such a personal consecration, as shall make all our members diligent workers in behalf of Christ and the church. Are we studying to know and attempt whatever will render this covenanted band a moulding, purifying power among the people, that the clear witness of this church may enlighten many families? We ought to scatter religious papers and tracts among the neglecters of the sanctuary, and persuade them to hallow the Sabbath by regular attendance on the means of grace. We should ascertain that all the children of our parish attend constantly the Sabbath School, and then gather in outcasts to train for God. We need to march into line with other churches of our faith and order, to

do our full share in our country's complete christianization, and the work of the world's conversion. To that end we must cultivate a more beneficent spirit, freely giving, for we have freely received. Oh, my companions in Jesus! consecrated friends! we have a glorious work to do. Let not our indolence shame our pedigree as a church.

A special want now is the addition to our number, of active men. From our insular position, the young men must seek their fortunes in the larger marts of trade. Still there are those in middle life, honored citizens, our fellow-worshippers, whom we could wish to see professors of religion. We need their co-operation in the church, as well as in the parish. An addition of a dozen energetic, whole-souled men, would treble the power of the church. In God's battle with sin, we are the troops long under fire, that need to be reinforced from the reserve corps, for a final charge on the enemy's works, and a brilliant victory. In other days, this church has had such accessions. Some of you, I know, recall the first Sabbath in March, 1842, when nineteen good men and true, joined themselves to the Lord, a number of whom still remain with us. No longer since than July, 1858, ten males, of all ages, professed their faith in Christ. God speed the return of those Pentecostal scenes.

When a regiment sends on the report of its present force, honorable mention is made of those whom a soldier's death has mustered out of service. The memory of gallant officers and brave privates, fallen in freedom's cause, their comrades cherish as an heritage of honor, bought with blood, and to be kept pure and shining, if it must be so, even with the lives of those who fill the

places of the dead. Thus our thoughts recall those departed in the faith from this band of Christ's sacramental army. For five generations, the ark of the Lord, abiding in this tabernacle, has received the adoration of heart-worshippers. I enter this time-honored structure; I think how the feet of the ancients have paced its aisles; and my mind, lost to present affairs, lives in the former century. I feel as when I stand by the lone grave-stone on the top of the knoll, that identifies the spot of the oldest burial ground on this island, and the men of other days pass as actors over the field of mental vision. Those friends of God labored, prayed, fasted, while these oaken beams that look on us, witnessed their worship. Some of you, members now in this church, are the children or grand-children of those godly ones; perhaps most of you claim kinship or affinity through marriage with your old-time predecessors in God's holy covenant. Their earthly work is done; the preacher of nearly thirty years, and his congregation, sleep side by side in yonder church-yard. Your fathers, where are they; and prophets, do they live forever?

Eight hundred and fifty-one names are recorded as having been connected with this church. Probably in all, since 1711, nine hundred, or over. There now belong fifty-one males, two hundred twenty-nine females; two hundred eighty in all; of whom seventy-five reside off the island. Wordsworth has a poem of tender pathos, "We are seven," founded on the answer of a child to the question how many brothers and sisters it had. Some were far away, some dead; but the child's unhesitating repeated answer, counted them all still members of the home, still unforgotten at the hearth-stone. We claim all who have ever been true in church-fellow-

ship here. Though generations have passed since their souls went up on high, we reap the blessing of their labors; we call them our elder brethren and sisters in the Lord. Feel you not a solemn awe from the consideration that much the larger part of our membership have rested from the labors of the church militant, and entered into the glory of the church triumphant. Disciples of Jesus, yet toiling in the flesh, they call to us from the heavenly shore. Love; labor; live for Christ. Verily *we* are compassed about with a great cloud of witnesses.

Our predecessors built for God's honor, this temple, made with hands. Moreover, in organizing the church, sustaining the preached word, and institutions of religion, they were rearing a spiritual house, sacred to the Lord. In this latter work we too are church-builders; we have a part to act with those before us, in bringing toward completion this house of souls, begun on the foundations of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone. For more than six hundred years the Cathedral of Cologne has been in process of erection; and in our time, artisans engaged in filling a gorgeously painted rose window, in raising higher, day by day, here a clustered airy shaft, and there curving to its key-stone the lofty, soaring, pointed arch; in beautifying with rare marbles and precious stones some chapel shrine; in richly adorning with purple velvet, heavily bordered with a fringe of gold, a venerated altar; this lavish expenditure of industry, skill and treasure, evince the purpose to finish the splendid cathedral in peerless perfection.

More truly for the divine glory than beautiful minister, Jehovah accounts a company of saints, established

in the truth, and built up in mutual love; for these are the temple of the living God. Toward the adornment and finished symmetry of such a spiritual edifice, may we, Christian brother and sister, youthful alike with aged members of this church, contribute. For the house to be builded for the Lord must be exceeding magnificent of fame and of glory throughout all countries. Let us prepare, like good David, abundantly. Any attainment in personal piety above the common level, any Christian service prompted by pure love to the Lord, while ennobling the saint, makes him as a polished stone, strong and comely in the compacted edifice; adding to the holiness and influence of the church in its community. By the precious memories of the past, by the pressing duties of the present time, may this covenanted company of Jesus' disciples act faithfully their part for God and man. Then shall Jehovah's promise by Isaiah, his prophet, come to pass concerning our Zion; Behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colors, and lay thy foundations with sapphires. And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones. And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of thy children.

